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ARMS TALKS

SCALI: Konstantin Chernenko's failing health was publicly apparent at Yuri Andropov's funeral even before his colleagues chose him as the new Soviet leader. At 72, his emphysema frequently causes acute shortness of breath and weakens him generally. But though he's managed to show up for important occasions such as the opening of the summit conference of communist leaders, U.S. intelligence now believes that his condition has worsened recently. One medical report is that he's gradually dying because of the strain his weakened lungs have placed on his heart. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Defense Secretary Ustinov are now reported in virtual control of a hard-line anti-American foreign and defense policy. Taking advantage of the uncertainty, another hard-liner, Leningrad party chief Gregory Romanov, is reported to have assumed control of police and the KGB, thereby positioning himself as a strong candidate to succeed Chernenko. The more-moderate Mikhail Gorbachov, 52, youngest member of the Politburo, has been widely assumed to be the front-runner. But tough-talking Romanov has a reputation as a master plotter. Chernenko's health plus the backstage jockeying for power has created a climate of deep uncertainty and confusion in the Kremlin. President Reagan has been told by U.S. intelligence that until all of these problems are settled it's useless to expect Moscow to negotiate any significant agreements. John Scali, ABC News, Washington.